

# THE FATE OF THE INNER CITY

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K A I E R I K S O N

*When Work Disappears* is a truly important book, written by the reigning master of the study of urban poverty. William Julius Wilson is the author of a number of works on that general topic, the two most influential before the appearance of this one being *The Declining Significance of Race* and *The Truly Disadvantaged*. Wilson, clearly, likes titles that actually convey what one is about to read in the text to follow: *The Declining Significance of Race*, published in 1978, argued that social class is becoming more critical than racial discrimination in defining opportunities for black people in this country; and *The Truly Disadvantaged*, 1987, argued that the plight of America's inner cities is a result of hard economic realities and not, as has been so widely supposed, of the nature of ghetto life or the character of those who live it.

The first book had a considerable impact on those portions of the political left accustomed to thinking that racial prejudice and other states of mind are the real obstacles to any substantial shift in the prospects of black Americans. The second provided a

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*When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor* by William Julius Wilson  
(Knopf, 322 pp., \$26.00)

compelling brief against the ever-more-strongly felt view of those on the political right that poverty in the inner cities emerges naturally from a new life form being developed there, the main features of which are welfare dependency, family breakdown, a turn to drugs and predatory crime, sexual irresponsibility, and a lack of what comfortable people elsewhere are known to call the "work ethic." The main idea here, prominent in the philosophies of such heavy thinkers as Newt Gingrich, is that this new order of being can be understood as the real cause of poverty rather than as one of its more brutalizing effects.

It is easy to understand, then, given the nature of the national debate now under way, that Wilson's new book was widely awaited. Advance warnings were posted everywhere. Summaries of the book's main themes appeared in places like *The New York Times Sunday Magazine*. Two U.S. senators, one Nobel Laureate, and the presidents of both the National Urban League and the Children's Defense Fund were enlisted to provide comments for the dust cover. And when the book appeared, it made its case with characteristic intelligence and unrelenting good sense.

*When Work Disappears* is in two parts, the first a diagnosis of the problems of the inner city and the second a list of policy measures that could go a long way toward correcting those problems.

Wilson shares with most informed commentators the view that the urban areas of America are in deep trouble. At the core of the most industrialized of our cities is a rot that threatens the lives and livelihoods not only of those who live there but of those who have retreated into the seeming safety of the suburbs. That rot, Wilson warns us, is not only spreading but becoming more toxic in the process, eroding ever wider portions of urban space from the inside out.

The inner city has become more and more segregated by *race* as whites move out to the periphery. And it has become more and more segregated by *class* as the better-off blacks — professionals, shopkeepers, tradespeople — move out as well. The people who remain are a good deal poorer than those who preceded them, as well as more dispirited and farther removed from a sense of membership in the larger society. The inner city has become a place apart. How did this come about?

Well, Wilson tells us — ranging over some of the more logical

hypotheses — it clearly has something to do with the workings of racial prejudice: there is no escaping the fact that black people are funneled into the inner city at least in part because of the discriminatory policies of landlords and employers, banks and zoning boards. And it clearly has something to do with the cultural atmosphere of the ghetto: it is easy to appreciate that the sense of discouragement that results from being left out to such an extent will be reflected in the way people behave.

But the main reason for the rot of the inner cities (again Wilson's title moves directly to the point) is that worthwhile jobs have disappeared. The industrial face of America, to begin with, is changing. The need for low-skilled work is declining everywhere as service industries replace manufacturing and automation replaces mass production. Plants are shutting down, work forces are being drastically cut, and real wages are declining for people who have long assumed that income moves only in an upward direction. The outlook for the poorly skilled is dismal no matter where one looks.

But matters are far worse — desperately so — in the inner cities. The city came into being at least in part because manufacturing plants depended on the presence of a central source of power and on the presence of large numbers of workers who clustered in tenements within easy walking distance of the plant. The most wrenching of these changes, then, began in the city centers. Many plants simply closed down as older forms of manufacturing were discontinued, and the ones that managed to survive — free now from their reliance on a central power source — moved out to the edges of urban space where land was cheap and parking plentiful, highways were easy to reach, tax benefits available, and the growing problems of the inner city a reassuring distance away.

The new urban industries, then, belong to a different world — a world of information and service, of automobiles and suburbs, of white collars and technical skills. And that world is virtually unreachable for the poor of the inner city, though they live but a few miles away. They do not have the skills being asked for, for one thing, but equally to the point, they have no way of bridging the divide, because they are for the most part without cars and because public transportation is not only undependable but expensive in both money and time. Nor is there much chance of relocat-

ing to the suburbs, real estate costs having replaced restrictive covenants as the main instrument of segregation in our time. Wilson calls this "spatial mismatch," a disjunction made all the more searing by the fact that the geographical distances are so small while the economic and even the spiritual distances are so immense.

A digression:

We are a country of immigrants. From the early decades of the nineteenth century to the early decades of the twentieth, wave after wave of people from other parts of the world took a turn occupying the lowest footing on the American occupational ladder. It is a familiar story, though one that risks the look of caricature when told as abruptly as I am about to do now. For a century or more, a heavy flow of people, dominated as time passed by different national streams, poured into the country: four million Scots and English, followed in rough order by six million Irish, four million Scandinavians, four million Germans, five million Italians, and, as we turned into a new century, as many as ten million Poles, Slovaks, and Ukrainians — with more yet to come.

The original plan of most of those arrivals was either to earn a stake here and return to the village from which they had come or to buy farmland in the new country and resume the only life they knew. But the currents of history were flowing in the opposite direction, and a good part of that human traffic was drawn almost as if caught by a ruthless undertow into the center of the growing industrial cities.

The social geometry of that situation was that each wave of newcomers claimed the worst of the urban housing and the worst of the available work, almost as if it was responding to a law of nature. For each wave being replaced, the movement was *out* residentially and *up* occupationally. Things were not so neat as I have just described them, of course, but it was a distinctive pattern nonetheless — every incoming wave taking over the bottom rung on the escalator, moving the preceding wave a step farther up and a step farther out.

In time the flow of immigrants from the old world slowed to a trickle, and migrants from the countryside (and from the American South in particular) replaced them. These new arrivals took

over their given niches in the tenements and in the assembly lines, as so many other waves had done before. But the law of succession had run its course. The factories to which they had been drawn closed their doors and became decaying hulks, while the shopping areas that had served them were boarded over.

So the inner city emptied of everything but people. A proper map of the new metropolitan region would show a thick outer ring of shopping malls and businesses and homes, encircling the city like a moat. And in the center, a great void into which flows a new kind of tired, poor, huddled, and tempest-tost. The inner city now contains pools of people who are so far outside the class structure, so isolated from the rest of America, that they are often described as belonging to an "underclass." Wilson has given up use of that expression for reasons too complicated to go into here, but the conditions it has been used to refer to remain a pitiless reality: the people of the inner city, for all practical purposes, occupy space at the very center of the American landscape but are not of it in any meaningful sense. They are set apart. Almost quarantined.

Wilson's language throughout is more measured than my report of it so far might suggest, although his distress is evident in every paragraph of this carefully crafted work. Up to a point, at least, his task, like that of any responsible social scientist, is to pile detail upon detail, observation upon observation, in the interests of building a compelling case. And yet Wilson knows far better than most of us that the reciting of facts often has a way of numbing both head and spirit. If I tell you, having learned these things from Wilson, that here are neighborhoods in Chicago where only one eligible adult out of three (and in some places only one in four) have jobs of *any* kind in a typical week, will you be impressed? And if I add that a large proportion of those jobs are part-time, dead-end, and miserably paid, will you be impressed? If I report to you that one of those Chicago neighborhoods lost 75 percent of its business establishments in the decade from 1976 to 1986 — and, moreover, that the 25 percent remaining consisted of one bank, one supermarket, forty-eight lottery agents, fifty currency exchanges, and ninety-nine licensed bars and liquor stores — will you be impressed?

Maybe. But sometimes the weight of these figures presses down

so heavily that the mind can no longer make the necessary translations, can no longer convert the grim array of details into a recognizable likeness of human life. And when that happens, a different kind of sketch can add depth, dimension, and scale to the scene. Here is a passage that caught my attention, because it describes a street corner on which I shopped and drank in my student days. It was largely black then, but lively and welcoming and without the sense of menace I later learned to associate with other black neighborhoods in the area:

The once-lively streets — residents remember a time, not so long ago, when crowds were so dense at rush hour that one had to elbow one's way to the train station — now have the appearance of an empty, bombed-out war zone. The commercial strip has been reduced to a long tunnel of charred stores, vacant lots littered with broken glass and garbage, and dilapidated buildings left to rot in the shadow of the elevated train line. At the corner of Sixty-third Street and Cottage Grove Avenue, the handful of remaining establishments that struggle to survive are huddled behind wrought-iron bars. . . . The only enterprises that seem to be thriving are liquor stores and currency exchanges, these "banks of the poor" where one can cash checks, pay bills, and buy money orders for a fee.

The results of all this, Wilson points out, are several:

For one thing, the lack of worthy jobs forces many people into the underground economy — which, in many places, is little more than another way of talking about the drug market. That, in turn, hugely increases the level of violence in the inner city. A small minority of those who live there take drugs, a smaller minority deals them, and a smaller minority yet becomes involved in the violence. But drugs nonetheless work their way into the grain of inner city life and threaten to dominate its cultural climate.

For another, the lack of work contributes substantially to the increase in female-headed families. It is hard to think of a topic in recent years that has attracted more misinformation or touched more sensitive nerves, but the fact of the matter seems to be — Wilson is clearly the preeminent authority here — that the rate of pregnancy among young women in the inner city has not really

gone up in recent years. The rate of *marriage* has gone down. And the reason for that is not hard to deduce once you know how few of those young fathers have anything like employment in the present or prospects in the future.

And, to offer one final example, the despair and demoralization that accompany sustained joblessness often lead to behavior that employers and other onlookers — no better equipped than the rest of us to understand such connections — see as reflections of underlying character. There is a cruel circularity at work here. The degrading circumstances that so impress Gingrich and other observers on the right are clearly the result of exposure to unlivable circumstances, the traumatic effects of living in the midst of a chronic disaster. But if you walk into that scene without having informed yourself of the nature of the disaster and look through lens of a narrow enough grinding, it is not hard to assume that the inner city had become a gathering place for some of the sorriest human specimens to be found anywhere. And if you conclude from this that the inner city suffers from a lack of virtue rather than a lack of opportunity, your approach to public policy will be unsparing. (A writer for *The National Review*, who shares Wilson's gift for straightforward titles if not his compassion or outlook on the inner city, called his review of the new book "When Decency Disappears.")

Wilson's own list of policy remedies is wise, generous — and unlikely to be enacted anytime soon. It includes:

an overhaul of our system of schooling and of job training along the lines of programs now being developed in Japan and Germany;

massive aid to blighted neighborhoods, in recognition of the fact that there are no urban places elsewhere in the industrialized world even remotely like our inner cities, and in appreciation of the fact that decay like that is bound to spread;

urgent efforts to reduce the "spatial mismatch" that so cuts off the ghettos of America;

modern versions of public work programs to increase employment opportunities; as well as

extensive systems of health care, child care, and the like.

None of the above will come to pass with this president, this Congress, or this political climate — as Wilson well knows. What we really need, to quote W. H. Auden, is “a new style of architecture, a change of heart.” If such a day does come in our time, it will owe its dawning in good part to the extraordinary efforts of William Julius Wilson.